DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 851 FL 014 227

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TITLE An Interdisciplinary Immersion Program in Foreign Languages.
PUB DATE Dec 83
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (100th, New York, NY, December 27-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement Gains; Business Administration Education; Church Related Colleges; *College Second Language Programs; Curriculum Development; Extracurricular Activities; Federal Aid; *Financial Support; Fine Arts; French; Higher Education; History Instruction; *Immersion Programs; Inservice Teacher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Language of Instruction; Language Proficiency; Latin Americans; Philosophy; Political Science; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; Sociology; Spanish; Teacher Qualifications; Theological Education
IDENTIFIERS *Boston College MA

ABSTRACT

The development and coordination of interdisciplinary immersion programs in French and Spanish at Boston College are chronicled, and some issues of federal grant support are discussed. The programs, currently involving the history, theology, philosophy, fine arts, management, and sociology departments and soon including political science, consist of one course taught in each department in each language. Most are standard courses ordinarily taught in English. Students are also encouraged to take a coordinating course in the appropriate language. Extracurricular activities play a large role in both programs. Among the issues addressed during the program's course were the possible admission of Latin Americans to the Spanish program and more closely defining the function of the coordinating course. Additional projects planned include training other college and high school personnel to run similar courses, and opening undergraduate immersion courses to secondary language teachers for graduate credit. Funding by the Department of Education and National Endowment for the Humanities has had advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages are adequate funds for support activities such as consultants, travel, materials, publicity, and departmental coordination, and the prestige of association. Disadvantages include walking the line between proposal specifications and actual practice, and the possible negative impact of losing funding. (MSE)

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An Interdisciplinary Immersion Program in Foreign Languages

Vera Lee

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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A colleague once told me that a student of his wanted to write a five-page paper on "God, Man And Nature." I find myself in that same unenviable position in trying to accomplish just two things within these 15 minutes: First, to provide you with an update on Boston College's "Immersion Program in Foreign Languages" and second to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of molding a program that has received important government funding.

Before explaining where we have come in the last year, let me give a brief description of the project, for the benefit of those who might conceive "immersion" in our Jesuit institution as some latter-day baptismal orgy.

Immersion as we practice it means interdisciplinary study in a foreign language. Specifically, at Boston College, 7 departments: History, Theology, Philosophy, Fine Arts, Management, Sociology, and next year an eighth, Political Science-each offers one undergraduate course entirely in the French language. That course is taught by a full-time senior member of the department in question, one who is either a native French person or who speaks the language fluently. In addition to this, as of last September, the departments of History, Political Science, Sociology and the School of Management have begun offering one course apiece in Spanish. Most of these are standard courses, ones that would ordinarily have been given by those departments, but in English. Besides this, students are encouraged to take an Immersion coordinating course in French or in Spanish (depending on which program they have enrolled in), to help them prepare for work in the interdisciplinary courses. The

FL014227

1983

coordinating language classes are, logically, conducted by the Department of Romance Languages. And that, in a nutshell, is the basic idea.

Last year in outlining the project I ended with the words "Quo vadis?" Let us now ask "Quo usque venimus?"

Where have we come? We have not fulfilled our original dream of insisting that each student take his/her whole curriculum of required and elective courses in the Foreign Language Immersion Program. This is largely because upper classmen who learned about the opportunity had already completed requirements such as Theology or Economics and didn't want to repeat them. Besides this, many incoming freshmen, despite their academic virginity, were too frightened to become enticed into a full Immersion Program. So where we had originally envisaged 20-25 students taking all their courses within the program, we actually have had only a handful of fully immersed ones. On the other hand, 45 students now take from one to four courses in the French Program and 24 are doing the same thing in Spanish. Consequently, although the concentration may appear diminished, the opportunities for taking Immersion courses are actually far greater. The program has become more accessible and increasingly popular with the undergraduates.

It would be wasteful of time to go into detail about our extra-curricular activities, but they are important in keeping the student Immersion population together as a group, in having them mingle with faculty outside of class, in allowing them additional opportunities for practice in the foreign language. To give you just a sample of the events: the Spanish program instituted a Spanish film and lecture series, and the French program has had

lectures in French, one by the former director of French television (a man currently in charge of restructuring the Louvre), a lecture-demonstration by the director of the Boston Camerata, two talks by Laurence Wylie, one of whose texts is used in the French coordinating course. And next semester we shall help sponsor a Marivaux play, La Double inconstance, to be staged in Boston by a director of the Comédie-Française, in conjunction with the French National Conservatory of Dramatic Art.

But let us put such activities aside to explain some of the thinking and planning that have gone into the project during the past year. Throughout the year the Immersion faculty met once or twice a month to discuss problems and plans. These meetings turned out mainly to be a way of touching bases and sharing information about courses and students. But we did grapple with some heavy issues. For example, some faculty wanted to build up the Spanish program by admitting native Latin Americans to its courses. This turned out to be unfeasible, however, since Boston College is anxious to have the Latin Americans on campus as well prepared in English as possible, and it frowns on linguistic isolation of foreign nationals.

So, some of our most important brainstorming took place last summer. In June we held a two-week workshop for Immersion faculty for purposes of information sharing, rethinking the curriculum and self-evaluation. We devoted the entire first day to discussing the Romance Language Department's Immersion coordinating course in French, taught by me. On the one hand this provided me with a sounding board that I very much needed, and on the other it permitted the new faculty recruits from other departments to avoid the glare of the spotlight the first day of our workshop. Many questions had to be resolved, e.g., what was the function of the French

coordinating course, and more important, what should it be? How could it best serve the interdisciplinary faculty? By the end of that first day it was clear that I had been trying to do the impossible, attempting to relate the language course directly to all the other French Immersion courses, to use their materials in my class and so on. We agreed finally that its most important function should be rather to train students to perform more competently in the other Immersion courses, to write and give reports in a more correct manner. (And this, parenthetically is precisely what I have been doing this year, I believe successfully, at the level of college advanced composition). Then subsequently, each professor in French gave demonstrations of a sample class. These were videotaped and will be shown to the Spanish faculty next summer's workshop, which will concentrate on the Spanish component.

As far as evaluation of the project is concerned, we need much more concrete information than what came out of that workshop or even out of the University's evaluation forms completed by the students, and out of our own questionnaires. As this point, the data we have could make us complacent. It's affirmative and undoubtedly colored by the enthusiasm and good will shared by students and faculty involved in the Immersion experience. We need two pieces of information in particular. First, to what extent, if any, does the experience actually affect a student's competency in the language, and secondly, what level of linguistic proficiency should a teacher possess in order to perform well in such a program? In order to ascertain this, we have applied for a small private foundation grant that would enable us to conduct

professional pretesting and posttesting of Immersion students and Faculty in 1984 and 1985.

And two final items in our rethinking and planning of the program. Under the guidance of the consultant who joined us last year-the inspired and ubiquitous Claire Gaudiani--we shall hold an in-service institute early in September of 1984 in order to help train interested college and high schcol personnel to run immersion programs on our model. Further, our graduate dean wholeheartedly favors another Gaudiani suggestion, this is, the opening up of our undergraduate Immersion courses for graduate credit to high school teachers in the area.

It would be tempting to continue speaking about how the experiment has been taking shape, but the time has come to fulfill the second objective of this paper, that is to explain some of the plusses and minuses of running a program under government funding. One of the first advantages that would obviously come to mind is money. In reality we were prepared to go through with the project with or without funding. On the other hand the outside help has permitted us to get started on the right foot, to publicize the program, to engage eminent lecturers, to gather materials, to hire a consultant, to travel, to give support to the various participating departments in order to get their support in return, and so forth. I should explain that prior to the N.E.H. funding we had already obtained a two-year grant from the Department of Education, whose sponsorship extended to aspects beyond the scope of the Humanities. The N.E.H. funds are limited to the humanities part of the curriculum and contribute to aspects of the program not covered by other monies.

The initial financial boost has, of course, been a blessing. But we have, rightly or not, been more concerned with the prestige, especially the prestige of the N.E.H. grant. And this is the moment-before revealing any minuses in the system--to pay a short but sincerely meant tribute to the N.E.H. personnel, their policies and procedures. We have been much impressed by those we have dealt with personally, by their feet-on-the-ground approach, by the fact that they are not looking for verbiage or gimmicks in proposals and projects, but quality, and finally by the fact that they themselves <u>have</u> quality. We are indeed proud to be associated with them.

Now what are the problems involved in having such funding? Clearly the first problem that <u>we</u> encountered was the need to write a proposal which described in detail a non-existent program, its plan of operation, its financial intricacies, its future. A tricky feat to carry off if you're not a prophet or a visionary. It was a bit like realizing that by a fast approaching date you must send in an abstract of your unwritten MLA paper on "Gay Marxist Phenomenological Deconstruction in the <u>Chanson de Roland</u>." Naturally you have only one recourse, that is, to "invent" your proposal. And then lo and behold, when you actually write the paper the imaginary abstract works as a real outline and provides you with a very sturdy skeleton on which to hang some academic flesh. Well, just between you and me, that's more or less what happened in writing the Immersion proposal. Now here is the catch-22. The imaginary bones of our theoretical proposal seemed so strong and so convincing to us that we believed from the beginning that they were real and, in fact, the

only possible reality. Indeed we have been most conscious of the "integrity of the grant," considering our modest proposal to be an almost irrefutable Bible. So one of the problems facing us still is always: how do you tread the fine line between doing what you said you'd do in the proposal and doing what you think you should in practice. In our case, we would not want to tamper with cur basic system. We would not, for instance, welcome the idea of having part-time instructors teaching in the Immersion curriculum. Yet we would trust that the N.E.H., if consulted, would approve modifications that would truly enchance the project.

Now in writing this paper, I had hoped to discover more disadvantages to having the funding, but quite frankly the only possible cloud on the grant horizon is the question of whether the eventual withdrawal of funds would have a negative impact on the program. The University administration constantly emphasizes the need for adequate numbers of students in classes; yet some of our courses are small. Given all this, how long would other departments cooperate with us? My own conviction is that the numbers attitude might affect at most one or two of the participating departments, but that there is such strong support for the experiment in the majority of departments and among the students that it would be difficult to stop it now. And so we worry about other things. For example, can the Spanish program measure up to the French in faculty resources? Does the Immersion Program provide too much competition for advanced courses given in our own Romance Languages department? Undoubtedly the answer to both these questions is no, and in any case neither worry has us truly losing sleep.

So I shall conclude by mentioning two letters that came in the last few weeks. The first from Cléo Boudreau, Chairman of Humanities and Modern Languages at Suffolk University who writes that 18 years ago at the Northeast Conference in N.Y. a committee on "Content and Crossroads" urged that non-literary subjects such as political science or history be taught in foreign languages. Brownlee Corrin, who chaired the committee, of which Prof. Boudreau was a member, said "this is an idea whose time has come. Now let's not sit on our hands, but return to our home institutions and do something about it." Professor Boudreau writes "obviously, that didn't happen. The time was not right perhaps..." The time must be right now, because, according to the second letter, sent by Carlo Coppola, Chairman of Area Studies at Oakland University, Oakland is about to begin a very rich program along our lines. My last word is simply that, if the idea speaks to you, "Go ye and do likewise."